PIERRE LOTI ON WOMAN

BY DANA BARON

IN Paris the other day someone projected into the arena of public discussion the diverting question, "What sort of man understands women best?" It was a titbit for the knowledgeable in a city that recognizes in the main just two problems of life,—one of them concerning the woman in the case, the other concerning the other woman.

One witty native answered that he understands women best "who has nothing to do at the time when women have nothing to think of." Another, more tamely, "The man who understands women is the man whom women do not understand." A third had satisfied himself that the man who once had penetrated woman's secret would commit the handiest local form of hara-kiri.

Thus down the list. He must be sympathetic, said one; dominating, said another; he must be a Don Juan; he must stand in awe of woman; he must proceed on the conviction that she had no meaning whatever.

And now is heard Pierre Loti, exotic, dreamer, spiritual native of the Orient, who affirms that no man understands woman, and that simply to interrogate the riddle is pleasanter anyway than to solve it.

"It is impossible to understand even one woman," declares the author of "Aziyadé." "How should one understand women? There are as many separate enigmas as there are women, and each was learned unanswerably from the Sphinx. I cannot conceive what type of man—save that he would have to be multiple minded and multiple souled—could best understand the generality of women.

"As for myself, many have opened their hearts to me, and into those mysterious alcoves I have looked deeply. But I have taken away no understanding of what lurked in the shadows or lay more secretly curtained from intrusion. I am not yet in possession of the secret, and my joy has been in the search and the always baffled sense of woman's unfathomable strangeness. Man's delight in woman is aroused when the imagination receives an invitation to go whither it knows not and is persuaded that it can never know."

Pierre Loti

AFTER his arrival in New York a few weeks ago to superintend the rehearsal of his new play, "The Daughter of Heaven," written in collaboration with Judith Gautier, Monsieur Loti was asked his views on every subject under the sun. Some of his newspaper questioners, indeed, entered the unsunned hyperspaces and the fourth dimension.

The distinguished Immortal of the French Academy was besought to express himself upon matters as momentous and diverse as the ideal heights of heels, the proper flower to be worn at prizefights, the purplest of the passions of the Orient, baseball, hobble skirts, wicked widows of fifty, and the new rage abroad for side whiskers.

His answers, not to these questions but to others, showed that the West was too brisk for Monsieur Loti. Our commotion is an affliction to him. Lover of silence and meditation, he longed to get back to the Orient, where "abundance and continuity of agreeable sensations cradle you in an endless dream." New York is not for him, except to be visited, praised with detachment, and left.

Also he gives us to understand that, though he can admire themselves, he has no sympathy for the new views and activities of Western women. They have served only to strengthen in him his traditionalism and his love of the traits most conspicuous in the more primitive types of women found in Turkey and the countries of his travels in the East. Like Hearn, like La Farge, like Beaudelaire, he is drawn to the woman of untutored soul who has kept unspoiled the alluring and simple gifts of Nature. For the author of "Faces and Things That Pass," progress since Eve has been largely a progress backward.

That these daughters of Lilith are often without moral development means nothing to Monsieur Loti, the artist. He would be as inclined to question Aphrodite's. Author of many books in which women are delicately portrayed, he is an impressionist and savant of sensation. He calls himself no more. Yet if what he writes would not invariably gain the Prix Montyon, the work is always pure and of exquisite literary savor. It was Lafcadio Hearn, acolyte of beauty, who referred to the author of "Le Mort de Philæ" as "the divine Loti."

WITH the present interview as the occasion, Monsieur Loti was sought in his apartments in New York just off Central Park, in the 60's. He was found idling over an aromatic cigarette. The eminent representative of French letters, who knows how to look bored with Gallic finesse, listened to several questions on the subject of women "new" and "old" and patiently heard a suggestion that he tell the American public something about his views of both. The suggestion was broadened to include the women of his own experience. Then this shyest and most reserved of men did a remarkable thing. He measurably complied with the suggestion!

"Did you enter the port of New York, Monsieur Loti, with a purpose at all like that you brought to the port of Nagasaki before you wrote 'Madame Chrysanthème'? You will recall, perhaps, that you were then bent upon marriage with 'an affected, cat's eyed little woman' whom you expected to find, fan in hand, behind some little sliding paper screen."

Monsieur Loti listened with amusement. "No," said he. "I come for a daughter of heaven, it is true; but solely for the sake of my play so named, and not for any fabulous female of accessible heart."

"Did you bring with you any fixed impression of American women?"

"No, only the vaguest. Those I have seen abroad have struck me as distinguished and beautiful; but since reaching New York I have seen very few. By these few I have been charmed. My more recent impressions would have to be partly based upon the accomplished women who are appearing in the rehearsals of my play. These impressions have been highly agreeable. I have been astonished to discover how sound a dramatic equipment your stage women possess. My intentions are apprehended and followed with all of that amazing alertness that characterizes you as a people. The actresses I have seen have taste, elegance, and beauty. Even the women who take lesser parts have the last. But perhaps before I leave I shall have had some glimpse of what truly is meant by 'The American woman.'

"A friend has tried to make her real to me, speaking from the point of view of sympathy and knowledge. Some of her dominant traits are thus not wholly unfamiliar, as viewed both here and abroad. They establish her as the possessor of rare attributes. One might possibly feel a fear that the flower of dreams thrives but ill in the hearts of your active and accomplished women. But perhaps the very qualities that make this so create some new depth of the impenetrable, an only more complex lure of soul."

There was a pause. "You ask me," he resumed, after a glance out of the window, and a leisurely toying with his cigarette, "to say what I think about the suffragette and her pet purpose. I can only say that the aspiration back of the feminist movement as a whole seems to me a false one. Four walls ought to inclose, and the home to limit, the activity of women. They were happier when their interests were concentrated there; the home itself was sweeter. In rending the veil of mystery that heretofore has inclosed her, to bear part in public affairs, woman has surrendered the secret of her greatest charm.

"In America, it is true," added Monsieur Loti, "the women have a situation peculiarly their own to cope with, and the conditions may call for and justify the course the suffragette element is pursuing. I shall not say. But I should not wish the women of my country to succumb to the onrush of new ideas, and I do not think they will. They have learned the secret of maintaining an unassailable position of influence, proper to them as women, without resort to the vote or agitation for wider liberties."

IT is impossible not to feel a strained appreciation in everything Monsieur Loti says of the West. In the East alone is he other than a stranger. The response was accordingly quick when he was asked to speak of the experiences that had supplied the romantic motive for so many of his books.

"Most of the experiences about which you ask are mine alone; but of one or two perhaps I may speak." The writer of the most delicate prose in French literature, whose love for all things Turkish has led him in imagination to espouse the Crescent, again hesitated thoughtfully. Then he went on, "My first adventure of the heart was with a Turkish woman. I was only seventeen years old when I was sent to the Orient as midshipman on a French man-of-war. Immediately I fell under the spell of that new world which my soul had inhabited long centuries before. Apart from Byron, I had read no romantic books on the East. It was my world simply by a need of my nature. At the time I was just out of the naval school and wholly free in mind. Every impression came to me unblurred by others. My mind lay open to new sensations.

"It was then that I found myself drawn into a forbidden love for one of the wonderful Turkish women who hide in provocative mystery behind the cafess. At that time too I began writing day by day a story of my life, setting each incident down as it occurred. These notes I later published unsigned as having been written by an English officer. That book was 'Aziyadé.' The name is not actually that of the woman of my unforgetable dream. Turkish in sound as it is, the name is simply a combination of the exclamation 'Ah!' and 'ziade,' which means 'Still more, still more.'" In the book the lover is made to die. This, said Monsieur Loti, is the one exception to its truth of detail. "My book passed nearly unnoticed. Only